

**Course of Study School of Ohio
2010 Spring**

March 12-13 & April 9-10, 2010

COS 211—Hebrew Bible I

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Course Description:

This course interprets the developing institutions and traditions of Israel and examines the varying ways in which the Hebrew people understood critical events of their history as acts of God. Attention is given to the earliest covenants, the Exodus, the rise of the monarchy, and other events up to the eighth-century prophets.

Course Objectives:

1. Formation of a historical overview of the life and faith of ancient Israel
2. Exegesis of selected passages that illustrate crucial turning points in the history of Israel
3. Correlation of exegesis with its utilization in preaching and other pastoral functions
4. Reflection upon ways in which God has been at work in the lives of people in these biblical materials
5. Ongoing development of an exegetical methodology
6. Application of these studies to the concerns and issues of the present day

Required Texts:

1. *The Original Story: God, Israel and the World* by John Barton and Julie Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) ISBN 0-8028-2900-7
2. *Preaching Biblically: Exegesis and Interpretation* by William D. Thompson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981) ISBN 13-9780687338405
3. A Study Bible based on the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) such as *The New Interpreters Study Bible*, *The Discipleship Study Bible*, *The Wesley Study Bible*, etc.
4. You will need to have access to a King James Version (**not** a New King James Version) and a New International Version of the Bible as well as to the NRSV

Course Expectations:

- 1. Reading and Writing Assignments:** Students are expected to read all of the assigned material, to complete two written assignments according to the instructions given by the professor (handing each assignment in at the beginning of the class session) and to complete one brief examination over the assigned reading. **The full details of the first assignment are included below. The second assignment will be similar in nature (although based on different texts), but full details for the completion of the second assignment will be given at the end of the first class meeting.**
- 2. Attendance:** National Policy (from the United Methodist Board of Higher Education in Ministry) stipulates that a person cannot miss more than 20% of course and still receive credit. Since much of the learning in this class will take place during our time together, missing even 20% of the course can be expected to affect the grade received.
- 3. Participation:** Students are expected to contribute to class discussions in an informed manner (having read the assigned material), showing respect to others whose experiences, perspectives and opinions may differ from their own.
- 4. See the official “Academic Honor Policy” stated below.**

The following article must be read before answering the questions in the written assignment:

LITERARY CONVENTIONS and the CHARACTER OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

According to William Thompson, “The literary form of the text profoundly influences its interpretation,” (*Preaching Biblically*, p. 61). A large part of the Old Testament is presented to us in **the literary form** called **narrative**. The word “narrative” refers to a particular **way** in which information is presented. It is interchangeable in American English usage with the word “story.” To call something a “story” in literary-critical terms does not mean to imply that it is factual or non-factual. The literary **form** in which the presentation of information is made has little to do with the accuracy of the information presented. Narratives (or stories) are simply accounts of events, whether actual or fanciful, which are reported in any way for any reason. You need to know something about narrative as a distinct **literary type** because **narrative** differs not only in content and form from other literary types (such as poetry, law, prophecy, psalms, proverbs, etc.) but also in **purpose** or **intention**.

In order to report on an event or to “tell” a story, the reporter (called the narrator) must decide what things will be told in **this** particular telling, what details will be related, what will be left up to the listeners’ imaginations and in what order or sequence things will be told (e.g. as they happened or in flashbacks, etc). The very nature of the task of reporting an event or telling a story makes it necessary for the narrator to leave some information out of any given retelling. Thus all narratives contain “gaps” which the audience or reader must fill in order to make sense of the story. Narrators may also leave deliberate gaps in the text (e.g. they may use deliberately ambiguous terms) in order to elicit audience participation. **Narrative gaps** draw the audience into the story and force the listener or reader to actively respond in order to understand the story. *Example=You can discover some of the narrative gaps in Gen.4:1-22 by asking “What made Cain and Abel think they should bring offerings to the Lord in the first place?” or “Why did the Lord not have regard for Cain’s offering?” or “Where did Cain’s wife come from?” Readers may supply answers to these questions but the text itself does not.*

Biblical narratives, in particular, are characterized by **narrative economy**. In other words, biblical narratives very seldom contain elaborate or explicit descriptions and very often contain “gaps” in the information provided in the story. Biblical characters are seldom described in great detail. Their motivations or the reasons they have for doing what they do are seldom reported by the narrator. And narrators seldom tell their audiences whether they themselves approve or disapprove of the actions they describe.

Narrative economy also encourages the narrator to tell one story after another without any attempt to specify the logical relationship between the various stories. The reader may **assume** that *cause and effect* explain the juxtapositioning of events, but this is a conclusion which exists in the mind of the reader, **not** in the text itself.

Because the narrators have left questions and ambiguities for their audiences to answer or resolve, these stories engage our interest and have the potential to affect us deeply-- precisely because we feel the need to “fill in the blanks” in the story. The openness of the story prods us to keep coming back to it. Just as we move through life trying to make sense out of the things that happen to us, so also the reader of a narrative tries to make sense out of the sparse details given about the biblical characters and the events in which they are involved.

One branch of literary-critical theory (“reader response criticism”) emphasizes the degree to which each reader actually constructs his or her own meaning based on factors that exist *in the reader* rather than in the words which are read. The act of reading is a creative process of “concretization” in which a reader bridges the gaps and silences in the text in order to “actualize” the potentiality of that text. Like Gestalt psychology, this approach to the text notes that human minds tend to perceive complete objects and patterns when only the barest suggestion of a form is actually there before our eyes. People with different backgrounds and life experiences may put the pieces together in different ways and may perceive different pictures from the same set of dots, shapes or words.

Each reader fills in **narrative gaps** in a slightly different way. Even the same reader may very well fill in narrative gaps differently with each subsequent reading of a narrative. The reader may have had new experiences in life in between readings, so that the person who reads the text a second time is not exactly the same person who read it the first time. Second and third readings done in the same sitting may also reveal details that are not noticed in the first encounter with a narrative. Thus “a text may yield a variety of meanings” (which is what Thompson calls the principle of **Multiplicity**, p. 72).

Sometimes ambiguity comes from our own ignorance of the customs, conventions and assumptions of the original speaker or the original audience. But as often as not, different audiences perceive different meanings in a story because of the ways in which they subconsciously fill in the informational gaps (**assuming** motives, rationales, emotions, relationships, etc.) that the narrator leaves unspecified.

Polarity and Identification: Biblical narratives characteristically begin with a situation of tension or a description of the build-up of tension and they characteristically end with a resolution of that tension. Within each narrative unit, there is an apparent movement from disequilibrium (tension) to equilibrium (resolution of that tension). Sometimes, the equilibrium which is achieved is temporary, and the resolution which supplies the ending for one narrative becomes the basis for the tension or the disequilibrium of the next narrative unit.

The “tension” which we call the starting point of a narrative is caused by opposing ideas, values, customs, needs, characters, etc. moving in some way against each other. Within the dynamics of any narrative, the careful reader can discover either explicit or implicit polarities (see Thompson, pp. 54-56).

It is important to discover the **polarities** operating within the text, because the meaning we derive from a narrative is greatly shaped by our intuitive **identifications** within the dynamics of the story (i.e., we understand the story differently depending upon where our sympathies lie). *For example: the way you understand the point of a story about an American soldier fighting against the British in 1776 will vary, depending upon whether you are an American or British, whether you consider the fighter to be a rebel (i.e. an enemy) or a patriot (on “our” side).*

One of the reasons stories engage our attention is because they offer us various characters with whom to identify. Different audiences (or the same audience at different times) can focus on and identify with different characters in the same story, leading them to draw different meanings from the story (thus Thompson’s principle of **multiplicity**). However, readers need to consider whether their intuitive identifications are the ones which the author(s) or the traditionist(s) **intended** for them to have. It is often helpful to try to **reverse** your initial or intuitive identification and to listen again to the story from this new perspective. A reversal of natural identification often leads to new, revelatory insights. (See Thompson, *Preaching Biblically*, pp. 70-72)

In Thompson’s opinion, it is a **mistake** “always to make our identification with the ‘good guys’” (Thompson, p. 71). Abel may be considered the “good guy” in Genesis 4, but identifying oneself with Abel leads to an interpretive dead end! By far “the easiest mistake to make in identifying one’s self within the text is to see it as “a model for morality” rather than as “a mirror for identity” (Thompson, p.70). For instance, if the story of Cain and Abel is seen as a **model of morality** one might conclude “I/we should not be like Cain” or “I/we should be my/our brother’s keeper,” etc. Such moralistic conclusions (while they are often drawn from this narrative), say nothing at all about the nature of God or the nature of God’s relationship with humankind. However, if the story is seen as a **mirror of identity** one might conclude “In some ways I am/all human beings are like Cain.” The Good News of the Gospel can then be preached from this story by assuming (as Thompson does) that the way in which God responded **then** continues to be the way God responds **now** to our Cain-like attitudes and actions.

Contextuality (Historical Contexts for the telling of the narrative): When we call a text a narrative, we indicate our belief that some person or group of persons (the “implied narrator”) originally addressed this utterance (either orally or in writing) to a particular audience. When you develop a sermon or a lesson or a story, you usually have some idea of what your audience will already know and what will have to be explained to them. You may already have some ideas about what they believe and how they will react to what you say. You compose your speech with your intended audience in mind. *Think, for example, of the differences between a children’s sermon and one intended for adults.*

Interpreters use the biblical text itself to try to deduce (from clues in the text) what the narrator assumed the audience would know and what had to be explained; what the narrator assumed the audience would think, etc. Although we often cannot specifically identify this hypothetical or “implied” narrator or his or her specific audience, we can find *clues* to some of the cultural and theological assumptions (the “contexts” or

“worldviews”) of the people who are telling the story and of the people to whom the narrative in its present form was first addressed. *Look for example at Gen. 11:3. The narrator assumes that the use of bricks and bitumen as building materials needs to be explained—suggesting that the implied audience usually used stones and mortar for building (indicating the audience probably lived in Canaan rather than Egypt or Mesopotamia).*

The implied narrator and the implied audience may have had ideas about God and the world that are not identical to your own. *Look for instance at Gen. 8:20-21. Do people today think God is pacified by the smell of barbecued meat?* Such differences in ancient and modern **world views** must be addressed before the preacher can find valid linkages between the word God spoke in the past and the word God wants people to hear now (see Thompson’s principle of Correspondance).

Furthermore, a narrator may speak as an eyewitness (living in the same time and culture as the action and characters described) or as a “tradent”(one who hands on traditions which have been handed down from previous generations of witnesses). The texts themselves often provide the observant reader with clues which indicate whether or not the narrator’s vantage point in history is contemporaneous with the action described in the narrative. *Look for example at Gen. 12:6. The narrator who says “At that time the Canaanites were in the land” clearly is speaking from a much later time than the time in which the story is set, i.e. in a time when the Canaanites were **no longer** in the land.*

Contextuality (Literary Context) and Intentionality: Thompson says “the single most fundamental question to be asked of the [interpretive] exercise – Why is this text there?” (pp. 48-49). The reader needs to ask why is **this** narrative included **here**? “Just because it happened” is not an adequate answer because lots of things must have happened that are not reported. The question is why is **this** incident reported? Literary context can provide us with ways to fill in the gaps in the unstated intentions of the narrator. *Example= In Gen. 4:23-24 the narrator quotes a bragging statement that Lamech (one of Cain’s descendants) says to his wives. The narrator does not tell us whether we should admire or condemn Lamech’s attitude. Nothing is said in the text about why this information is included in the larger story. The reader is left to fill in the gap: out of all the possible bits of information we might be told about this early time, why would we be told something like this? Is there anything that indicates whether or not Lamech should be considered a good example (a model of morality) for us to follow? Contextuality (looking at the texts which come before and after this Lamech story) helps us find a supportable answer. The Lamech story is preceded by the Cain and Abel story and followed by the flood story. Thus it is reasonable to conclude that the narrator uses this story in this literary context to illustrate the build up of sinfulness that leads to the flood (see Gen. 6:5-13). The **Literary Context** indicates that the narrator’s **Intentionality** was to use Lamech as a bad example (as a reflection of sinful human reality at that time).*

Pre-Class Reading and Writing Assignment (to be completed and handed in at the beginning of the first class session):

Read the following **before** doing Written Assignment One:

The Original Story, pp. vii—51

Preaching Biblically, pp. 9-96

“Literary Conventions and the Character of Biblical Narrative” (attached to this syllabus)

Biblical Texts: Genesis 12—13; 15—22; 25—33; Exodus 1—23

Written Assignment One

Type your answers to the following questions using **COMPLETE, SELF-EXPLANATORY SENTENCES** (so that the sentences make sense, even for a reader who does not have the questions at hand. Put your name at the top of each page and staple the pages together. **Do not use covers or folders.**

1. In **your own words**, describe what Thompson thinks makes preaching “biblical preaching.” (one paragraph)
2. Look at Thompson’s section on the selection of Biblical material for preaching (pp. 19-21). The word *pericope* (pronounced puh-**rick**-uh-pee) comes from a Greek term meaning “a cutting all around.” Where a pericope (a selection of text) is said to begin or to end can seriously affect the meaning one sees in the text. Read Gen. 12:10-20 as if it were a complete pericope, then go back and re-read the story as if it ended with 13:2 instead of ending with 12:20. What difference does ending the story with 13:2 make to your understanding of the point of the story? What difference does ending the story with 13:2 make in your understanding of Abram’s character?
3. What are some of the **narrative gaps** in the story contained in Gen. 12:10—13:2? (i.e., What questions are raised in the mind of the reader that are not in fact answered by the text?). How do you assume these questions should be answered? (For every gap you identify, give one or more potential answers).
4. Skip over to Genesis 20 and read the entire chapter. Which of the questions left unanswered by the story in chapter 12 are answered for you here in chapter 20? What questions are left unanswered? What new questions arise (what new narrative gaps can you see) as you read through the text in ch. 20? Is there anything in either story which indicates to you that the narrator either approved or disapproved of the actions or events described in these stories? How do you feel about the patriarch’s behavior in chapter 12? In chapter 20? Do you find his actions and attitudes to be admirable or worthy of imitation? Explain why or why not. If the audience saw these stories as mirrors of their identity (reflecting who

they really were) what might they understand about themselves? What might they understand about God?

5. Re-read Genesis 16:1-15 and Genesis 21:2-21. What names are used for the patriarch, the matriarch and the Deity in each of these stories? What elements do these stories have in common? How are the actions, the behavior, the characteristics of the matriarch, the patriarch and the Deity similar in these stories? Why do you think these stories were told and retold to their original audiences?
6. What is the situation of conflict or tension with which the story in ch. 16 begins? Make a list or a chart that shows who the opposing characters within the dynamics of the narrative are and what polarities (opposing situations, characteristics, needs, qualities, etc.) are associated with which characters.

For example, if you were doing this exercise with the Cain and Abel story, you could list Cain at the top of one column and Abel at the top of a second column, with their opposing characteristics listed beneath them:

<i>Cain</i>	<i>Abel</i>
<i>Older</i>	<i>Younger</i>
<i>Tiller of ground</i>	<i>Keeper of sheep</i>
<i>Offering of fruit of the ground</i>	<i>Firstlings of flock, fat portions</i>
<i>Lord had no regard for offering</i>	<i>Lord had regard for offering</i>
<i>Murderer</i>	<i>Victim</i>
<i>Etc.</i>	<i>Etc.</i>

7. Do you think the original audiences who listened to the story in Gen. 16 would have identified most naturally with Sarai or with Hagar in this story? Explain why you think this is so. With whom do Christian readers usually identify? Explain why you think this is so. Try to reverse this initial identification and re-read the story from the perspective of the opposite character and the opposite descriptive poles. Do you think the ancestors of Israel come across as admirable in this story? If the audience reads or hears the story in chapter 16 as a mirror (reflection) of who they really are, what might they conclude about themselves? When you reverse your identification within the dynamics of this story, what happens to your understanding of why this story was preserved and handed down to us through the ages?
8. In what ways do you see yourself reflected in the stories in Gen. 16 and 21? What is there about yourself or about the ways you sometimes act that remind you of Sarai/Sarah? Of Hagar? Of Abram/Abraham? What reflections of Sarai/Sarah and of Abram/Abraham can you see in the actions and attitudes of Christians with whom you are acquainted?

9. What do these stories tell you about how God might act in response to you? In response to members of your congregation?
10. What do United Methodists mean by the terms “grace” and “prevenient grace?” (If you are not sure, you can look up in *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* the section titled “Distinctive Wesleyan Emphases” and read the introductory paragraphs).
11. Read Gen 16 and 21 again, making yourself assume that the stories of our ancestors in the faith illustrate the doctrine of prevenient grace. What sermon topics or themes might you come up with based on this way of reading these stories?
12. Re-read Genesis chapters 15 and 17. What is the subject of both stories? What names are used for the Deity and for the patriarch in each of these chapters? What does the deity promise to give the patriarch in the covenant described in ch. 15? Are there any conditions which the patriarch must agree to meet in ch. 15? What does the deity promise to give the patriarch in the covenant described in ch. 17? Are there any conditions which the patriarch must agree to meet in ch. 17? What do you think accounts for both the repetitions and the variations found in comparing these two chapters?
13. Look up the word “covenant” and give a very brief definition of this term (please cite your source). How do the “covenants” in Gen 15 and 17 fit or not fit with this specific definition?
14. It has been suggested that the first two chapters of Exodus commemorate the vital roles women played in making the Exodus event possible. Summarize the role (s) played by each woman who is mentioned in these two chapters.
15. As you read through Exodus 4—16, keep an eye out for references to the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart (e.g. 4:21, 7:3, etc.). Re-read Thompson’s section on “Correspondence” (his third “principle” for interpretation) and comment on the challenges which face the interpreter who attempts to discover and preach a contemporary Word of God based on these passages.
16. Think of the Exodus story as it appears in Exodus 1—16. What is the Problem, the Disequilibrium or the Tension with which this story begins? What are the polarities (the opposing forces, people or ideas) that are moving against each other as the story begins? What polarities remain as the story ends?
17. Look carefully at Thompson chapter IV, which suggests a methodology for developing sermons that are authentically based on Biblical texts. Look at the partially completed chart below and discuss possible answers you might give to the questions under the “NOW” sections.

Human Reality / Need THEN (in Exodus)	Human Reality / Need NOW
Need for liberation from bondage (Exod. 2:23-24; 3:7-9, etc.)	What kind of bondage are we in now? What do people today, in your congregation, need liberation from?
Oppressors want to hold on to their power over others	What kind of power over others do we try to hold on to? How do we do this and what do we rely on to do it?
Neither the oppressors nor the oppressed “know the LORD”	What does it take for us to learn to recognize / trust in the LORD?
The oppressed are fearful, unable to save themselves	Who or what functions as Pharaoh in our lives? What powers or forces do we fear and are unable to save ourselves from?
The oppressed prefer the known evils of bondage to the unknown dangers of freedom (Exod 14:10-12; 16:1-3)	What evils do you or people you know put up with rather than risking new (possibly better but uncertain) endeavors?

18. Briefly outline or describe a sermon you might develop based on this model.